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15 March 2013

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Fox, J. C. (2011) 'Propaganda and the flight of Rudolf Hess, 1941-45.', *Journal of modern history.*, 83 (1). pp. 78-110.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/658050>

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Propaganda and the Flight of Rudolf Hess, 1941–45*

Jo Fox

Durham University

Like his younger brother Ian, Peter Fleming imagined the fantastic. The theme of his 1940 novel, *The Flying Visit*, was barely believable: Hitler, wanting to emphasize his status as the “Eagle Führer,” embarks upon a flight over England in order to survey what he sought to conquer. An assassination attempt blows his plane from the sky, but Hitler escapes in his parachute. As a highly recognizable figure now stranded in the English countryside, he contemplates his course of action: “If he could only get hold of Mr Chamberlain, or Sir Horace Wilson [Head of the Civil Service], . . . he would stand (he was sure) a fair chance of persuading them that he had come to England, risking everything, on a peace mission. The English would never take advantage of an unarmed enemy of the highest possible rank who with incredible temerity, and from the noblest motives, had faced untold dangers in order to put himself at their mercy. . . . And he, Hitler, would return to Germany not as a superman but as a god, a god who got results.”¹ Contacting an English aristocrat, Lord Scunner, who reveled in the celebrity afforded to those with connections to Nazism in the prewar years and whom Hitler briefly met at a Nuremberg rally, the Führer decides to surrender himself to the authorities. After the initial euphoria of securing such an extraordinary prize, the Cabinet cannot find appropriate propaganda or diplomatic strategies for dealing with him and decides to “say nothing, do nothing. . . . Keep the little man on ice.”² Eventually, in frustration at their inability to exploit the prize, they parachute the “Eagle Führer” back into Germany where they would know how to deal with him.

Just a matter of months after Fleming published this book, on the evening of May 10, 1941, routine patrols over the North Sea reported the approach of

* I would like to thank colleagues at the University of Glasgow, where this paper was first presented, for their thoughtful questions, and would like to thank in particular my colleagues at Durham University—Lawrence Black, David Moon, and Philip Williamson—and the journal’s two anonymous readers for their informed comments on the drafts of this article. I am also grateful to Lord Selkirk and the trustees of the Hamilton papers for granting me permission to cite the materials held in the National Library of Scotland.

¹ Peter Fleming, *The Flying Visit* (London, 1940), 46. Bizarrely, John Colville had been recalling this “ingenious and entertaining fantasy” on reading an Air Ministry intelligence digest which suggested that Goering regularly flew over London to “gloat over the destruction which the Luftwaffe was wreaking” when he heard of Hess’s arrival: John Colville, *Footprints in Time* (London, 1976), 110–12.

² Fleming, *Flying Visit*, 106.

a Messerschmidt 110 crossing the Scottish coast. The German airman bailed out just south of Glasgow and was found by a plowman, David McLean, taken to his cottage, and offered a cup of tea. He gave his name as Captain Alfred Horn.³ The village had probably never seen such excitement: the Home Guard mobilized, and they moved the prisoner to the Girl Guides' hut at Busby. At one point, around 200 military and civilian personnel inspected the find.⁴ At the local hospital, where he received treatment for a broken ankle, the visitor declared that he was Rudolf Hess and willingly showed photographs of himself in an attempt to confirm his identity.⁵ In a bizarre turn of events that paralleled Fleming's strange tale of 1940, the Deputy Führer had parachuted into Britain. The coincidence did not end there, however. As Fleming predicted, the authorities struggled in dealing with the potential propaganda coup, giving rise to prolonged speculation, rumor, and indeed diplomatic troubles until the end of the war.

The Hess affair raises central questions about the dilemmas, character, and reception of propaganda during the Second World War. Most accounts of the affair focus on why Hess flew to Britain, speculating in particular on the involvement of the Security Services. While brief observations on the propaganda aspects of Hess's arrival in Britain have been made by participants,⁶ the relatives of participants,⁷ and historians,⁸ these fail to give adequate consideration to the specific nature of the propaganda apparatus, in particular how the two propaganda centers tried to second-guess each other, and to the reception and broader effects of propaganda directed at European populations. Some of the difficulties faced by propagandists in attempting to make psychological use of the affair have been addressed. Clearly, propagandists' reactions went beyond simply being "baffled," as Michael Balfour claimed.⁹ As Lothar Kettenacker, Manfred Görtemaker, and Rainer F. Schmidt demon-

³ Official accounts can be found in HO 199/482, KV 36 and KV 2/37, National Archives, Kew (NA). For Hess's own account of his arrival, see Ilse Hess, *Prisoner of Peace*, trans. M. Booth (London, 1954), 31–38.

⁴ Statement by Inspector Thomas Hyslop of the Giffnock Constabulary, May 15, 1941, KV 36.

⁵ Ministry of Information (MOI) report, May 13, 1941, HO 199/482, NA.

⁶ Ivone Kirkpatrick, *The Inner Circle* (London, 1959); Sefton Delmer, *Black Boomerang* (London, 1962); Harold Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters*, 2 vols. (New York, 1967).

⁷ Wolf Rüdiger Hess, *My Father Rudolf Hess* (Munich, 1984); James A. Douglas-Hamilton, *Motive for a Mission* (London, 1971).

⁸ Lothar Kettenacker, "Mishandling a Spectacular Event: The Rudolf Hess Affair," in *Flight from Reality: Rudolf Hess and His Mission to Scotland*, ed. David Stafford (London, 2002), 19–38; Manfred Görtemaker, "The Bizarre Mission: Rudolf Hess in Britain," in *Britain and Germany in the 20th Century*, ed. M. Görtemaker (Oxford, 2006), 75–101; Michael Balfour, *Propaganda in War, 1939–45: Organizations, Policies, and Publics in Britain and Germany* (London, 1979). It should be noted that Balfour was directly involved in the propaganda initiatives surrounding the Hess case; see memorandum from Balfour, X/155, May 16, 1941, INF 1/912, NA; Rainer Schmidt, "The Marketing of Rudolf Hess: A Key to the 'Preventative War Debate'?" *War in History* 5 (1998): 62–83.

⁹ Balfour, *Propaganda in War*, 218.

strate, the affair prompted elaborate strategies that point to the exploitation of Hess's arrival by the Foreign Office in their negotiations with the Soviet Union in the months leading up to Operation Barbarossa.¹⁰ Schmidt's position, that the British "expertly exploited the Hess case and used the peace feeler of Hitler's deputy for a sophisticated and carefully thought out diplomatic offensive,"¹¹ certainly challenges Kettenacker's view that, since the rumors generated by Hess's landing prompted intense suspicion of the British by Stalin and the Soviets, the affair was "mishandled."¹² According to Kettenacker, that mishandling had implications for the fledgling Anglo-Soviet alliance, each government making significant "mistakes in analysing each others' intentions."¹³ However, with their focus on propaganda as diplomacy and on the "victory" of the Foreign Office over the Ministry of Information,¹⁴ scholars underplay the importance of the Hess case for the nature, organization, and impact of propaganda during the Second World War. A detailed analysis of British and German propaganda responses to the affair, and specifically of the way in which strategies evolved from an interaction between the protagonists, reveals the dynamics and nature of propaganda as a competition, a psychological struggle, whether imagined or real, between two rivals. Studies merely focusing on one nation's response inevitably overlook the importance of this exchange in constructing a propaganda response in wartime and, in the context of the Second World War, in providing means to distinguish between the specific dilemmas of democratic and authoritarian propaganda strategies and systems. Moreover, by investigating the affair solely from the perspective of the policy makers, historians have not considered the wider outcomes of the psychological initiatives, whether these were changes in attitude, ideas, opinion, or behavior. Consideration of outcomes is an essential element of propaganda analysis, and the case at hand is, in fact, one where it is possible to assess popular reactions in some detail.¹⁵ If we are fully to appraise, for example, Churchill's aim of using the Hess affair to strengthen morale at home, as identified by Görtemaker,¹⁶ or indeed question whether the affair was "mishandled" in the public arena, we should surely examine sources beyond those of central government and consider the ways in which the message was both conveyed and received. To this end, the

¹⁰ Kettenacker, "Mishandling a Spectacular Event"; Görtemaker, "The Bizarre Mission"; Schmidt, "Marketing."

¹¹ Schmidt, "Marketing," 64.

¹² Kettenacker, "Mishandling a Spectacular Event."

¹³ Ibid., 30. See also Gabriel Gorodetsky, "The Hess Affair and Anglo-Soviet Relations on the Eve of Barbarossa," *English Historical Review* 101 (1986): 405–20.

¹⁴ Schmidt, "Marketing," 70.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Terence Qualter, *Opinion Control in the Democracies* (London, 1985); Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York, 1973).

¹⁶ Görtemaker, "Bizarre Mission," 88.

present article draws upon a wider range of sources than previous works, combining analyses of official government papers, private collections of the protagonists, media coverage, and, most important, public and private views of the Hess affair as revealed through reports of the German Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service, or SD), British intelligence surveys, opinion polls, Mass-Observation records, and private letters to government.

This article focuses on the propaganda issues of the affair and has two central aims. First, it analyzes official reactions to Hess's flight in light of the specific dilemmas faced during May and June 1941 by the Ministry of Information (MOI) and the Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda (RMVP), which were complicated by Hess's mental state, and assesses the implications for propagandists' future operation. Hess's arrival marked a deepening of preexisting fissures between black and white propaganda units (the former a covert form of psychological warfare where the source is disguised or unknown, the latter a more overt official propaganda emanating from an identified source), as well as between the Foreign Office, the Cabinet, and the MOI in Britain and between the RMVP and the Reich Chancellery in Germany. Managing the public agenda is a way to exercise control and influence policy, and this was apparent to both British and German propagandists of the Second World War, where positioning in relation to the center was of the utmost importance. Although much has been written on the position of the Foreign Office, in particular its position in negotiations with the Soviet authorities in the aftermath of the Hess flight, few scholars have considered the impact on the MOI and its message. Where did the Hess affair leave the Ministry in June 1941, and indeed what implications did it have for the nature of British propaganda in the longer term, in relation to both the structure and the ethics of the "persuasive arts"? This question is particularly pertinent when considering the internal politics of "survival and status" that beset the MOI, consuming the energy that should have been devoted to its function as a propaganda agent and challenging the "notion of a cold, efficient, all-powerful national propaganda machine."¹⁷ Such trends were not exclusive to democracies, however. The Hess affair demonstrates that the RMVP's conflicts with the Reich Chancellery undermined National Socialist attempts to control the public space, harness opinion, and manipulate behaviors.

Second, this article examines how the publics in both Britain and Germany reacted to official statements and, indeed, to silences. Viewing propaganda solely from the center reveals little about the complexities of the environment in which the propaganda of the Second World War was operating. An assessment of public attitudes not only creates a fuller understanding of any

¹⁷ Qualter, *Opinion Control*, 144.

propaganda campaign, including its success or failure, but also, in relation to the Hess case, opens a vista onto the ways in which the public projected broader needs, desires, and anxieties in wartime. Not only were both British and German propagandists unable to control the spread of rumor within their populations (particularly notable in the German case, with its “totalitarian” potential) but those populations actually became active participants in the propaganda process. This bolsters Terence Qualter’s theoretical position that the “propaganda effect arises from the interaction of a communication and an audience . . . in a particular cultural and ideological environment.” For Qualter, such “variables must be considered as a unit,” with propaganda emerging as an “ongoing process involving both persuader and persuadee.”¹⁸ Ultimately, this points to propaganda as a nonlinear process, evolving within both the public and the private spheres and subject to multiple and conflicting pressures. Moreover, it questions whether the target of the propagandist can be seen solely as a “victim” and suggests instead that propaganda established a platform from which the public could express deeper, more fundamental concerns. In Britain, at least, propaganda might even be considered an essential component of democracy.

I

In Germany, Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Minister for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, first heard the news of Hess’s disappearance on the evening of Monday, May 12; Hess had been missing since Saturday. His adjutants had been arrested. For the Nazi elite, this was “dreadful news, a hard, almost unbearable blow”;¹⁹ Goebbels found the Führer “crushed”²⁰ and in “tears.”²¹ The Reich Chancellery released two communiqués through Otto Dietrich, Hitler’s press secretary, rather than through Goebbels’s Ministry. Goebbels himself had instructed the press and the radio merely to “report, not commentate.”²² Dietrich’s press releases undermined this strategy, and the contrast between the Chancellery and RMVP approaches suggested a lack of coordination in German propaganda, a fact commented upon by British intelligence officers in the aftermath of the affair.²³ The first of Dietrich’s statements, on May 12, reported that Hess had not returned from his flight and suggested that

¹⁸ Ibid., 110.

¹⁹ Goebbels diary, May 13, 1941, in Elke Fröhlich, ed., *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels. Sämtliche Fragmente. Vol. 4*, in 4 vols (Munich, 1987), 4:638.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Semmler diary, May 14, 1941, in Rudolf Semmler, *Goebbels—the Man Next to Hitler* (London, 1947), 33. Hitler’s reaction is also detailed in Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936–45: Nemesis* (London, 2000), 371–72.

²² Goebbels diary, May 13, 1941, in *Tagebücher*, 4:638.

²³ Political Intelligence Summary 86, May 28, 1941, FO 371/29135, NA.

he had suffered a nervous breakdown. When it became clear the following day that Hess was in Britain, the second press release declared that he had undertaken a purely personal initiative to seek an “understanding between England and Germany,” resulting from a mental “aberration” influenced by a host of magnetotherapists and astrologists.²⁴ The Reich Chancellery reaffirmed that Germany was committed to the destruction of the British Empire, a goal from which it would not be deterred.²⁵ Outraged that at this critical moment he had been excluded from the “inner circle” and not consulted, the Reich Minister found himself exasperated at these “unskillful announcements” and concerned that the population would wonder “if [Hess] was suffering from delusions, how could he remain the Führer’s Deputy?”²⁶ A Leipzig SD report of May 17 confirmed Goebbels’s fears, but for the time being he had no option but to sit and wait for the British response, expecting “the storm to break.”²⁷

The news of the Hess flight also came as a shock to the British. The *Scotsman* pronounced that “the arrival of a man from Mars would cause scarcely more astonishment.”²⁸ At the highest government levels, attention focused on the nature of his mission and his status as a prisoner of war,²⁹ with little initial concern about public presentation: official instructions merely indicated that Hess was not to be made a hero in the media.³⁰ Harold Nicolson, at this time Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Information, was concerned at the absence of a detailed propaganda directive six days after the flight and worried that the possibility for capitalizing on this most astonishing turn of events was fading away. Lord Beaverbrook, the much-lauded propagandist of the Great War and now Minister of State in the coalition government, had persuaded Churchill “not to make any statement at all.” In Nicolson’s view, “this is bad, since the belief will get around that we are hiding something and we shall be blamed in this Ministry. The real fact is that we cannot get maximum propaganda value out of this incident both at home and

²⁴ The original translation for the British government stated that Hess had fallen victim to “mesmerists” (*magnetiseuren*), but the statement was probably meant to indicate magnetotherapists, as it was well known in party circles that Hess was a devotee of magnetotherapy, the process of hanging large magnets above his bed to “draw out the negative forces”: see Robert Proctor, *The Nazi War on Cancer* (Princeton, NJ, 1999), 256–57. Dietrich’s account of the Hess flight can be found in Otto Dietrich, *The Hitler I Knew* (London, 1957), 61–64.

²⁵ Newspaper cutting, “Die Aufklärung des Falles Heß,” Wiener Library, London, 1582/2.

²⁶ Semmler diary, May 14, 1941, in Semmler, *Goebbels*, 33.

²⁷ Goebbels diary, May 13, 1941, in *Tagebücher*, 4:638. Leipzig SD report, May 17, 1941, cited in Jeremy Noakes, ed., *Nazism: A Documentary Reader*, 4 vols. (Exeter, 1998), 4:532.

²⁸ *Scotsman*, May 14, 1941, 4.

²⁹ Churchill’s recollections, for example, make no mention of the propaganda case: Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, 6 vols. (London, 1950), 3:53–58. See also Kettenacker, “Mishandling a Spectacular Event,” 23–28.

³⁰ Nicolson, *Diaries*, 164 (May 14, 1941).

abroad. I feel a terrible lack of authority in all this.”³¹ The Ministry had been kept “in the dark.”³² Nicolson’s observation not only demonstrates the standing of the MOI in the public mind and in government but also reveals the multiple agencies involved in British propaganda in May 1941. From its advent, the Ministry had been regarded by both public and the executive as weak, ineffective, and unnecessary. The Minister did not have a seat in the inner War Cabinet until Duff Cooper assumed that position, and he was included only due to his previous experience as secretary of state for war in the mid-1930s. The early Ministers, Lord Macmillan and Lord Reith, fell in quick succession, and the Minister of Information soon became known as the job that no politician wanted.³³ The matter came to a head over the Hess landing.

Churchill clearly wanted to take control of the overall propaganda message relating to Hess: the diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office, reveal an arduous battle to restrain Churchill from making a propaganda splash on May 14 and 15, 1941. In this Cadogan was supported by Beaverbrook, almost a quasi-independent power in himself, not just because he had the ear of the Prime Minister but also because he exercised considerable power over the press through his own media empire.³⁴ It is significant that Churchill eventually chose to turn to the Foreign Office and Beaverbrook for opinions on the propaganda line and not to Duff Cooper and the MOI, even though Cooper had initially approached the Prime Minister with views on the exploitation of Hess’s arrival for publicity purposes. Cadogan and Beaverbrook, considering the Minister of Information “an ass,”³⁵ quickly moved to isolate Cooper and persuade Churchill to ignore his petitions. This was a simple task in May 1941, when the Foreign Office must have appeared the more reliable agency in propaganda policy. It was now well known in government circles that the MOI was failing. A titanic battle with Hugh Dalton, Minister of Economic Warfare and Head of the Special Operations Executive, and Anthony Eden, Foreign Secretary, for control of psychological warfare prompted Cooper to recognize in May 1941 that “a propaganda crisis was close at hand.” The diaries of Robert Bruce Lockhart detailed machinations to bring Beaverbrook into the field of propaganda

³¹ Ibid., 165 (May 16, 1941).

³² MOI memo, LH/98/76, June 6, 1941, INF 1/912.

³³ Duff Cooper, *Old Men Forget* (London, 1953). These issues are fully explained in Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale: Home Front Morale and the Ministry of Information in World War II* (London, 1979).

³⁴ David Dilks, ed., *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, 1938–1945* (London, 1971), 379 (May 14 and 15, 1941).

³⁵ Ibid.

operations³⁶ or to transfer control of propaganda to the Foreign Office.³⁷ With his exclusion from policy over the Hess landing in the same month, Cooper's fate was all but sealed, and on July 21, 1941, he was replaced by Brendan Bracken, Churchill's long-time friend and confidante. This was a turning point for the MOI: the Hess affair finalized the executive's view that action needed to be taken. Under Bracken, the structure and mission of the MOI were redefined and its legitimacy within government established.

Although the Foreign Office gained overall control of the Hess propaganda from the MOI—a coup given the perceived psychological importance of having the Deputy Führer in British custody—tensions remained between the various agencies. Indeed, tensions remained within the propaganda message itself, particularly since the MOI and others, such as Sefton Delmer and his “black” propaganda unit at Woburn, did not refrain from using the Hess affair in their own campaigns. As contemporaries recognized, this lack of cooperation, no doubt the product of interdepartment competition and ambition in the field of propaganda, obviated a “consistent propaganda line” on Hess.³⁸ These tensions and the inability of the MOI to defend its territory had considerable influence over the propaganda surrounding Hess. Clearly, the Foreign Office used Hess's arrival to give the false impression to Soviet diplomats that negotiations between Britain and Nazi Germany were possible, a scenario that left the Soviet Union isolated. This deception, according to Schmidt, “[deterred] Stalin from initiating a new deal with Hitler and [compelled] him to seek the active co-operation of London against Hitler's aggression.”³⁹ However, the Foreign Office's control of the story within their sphere of influence did not run as smoothly as Schmidt implies.⁴⁰ Given the ambitions of the Foreign Office to run the “Bolshevik” hare⁴¹ and “to play down the whole story at home, but play it up abroad,”⁴² it is unsurprising that its vision did not include a clear strategy for the home front, leaving the government vulnerable when it came to British public opinion. The numerous difficulties faced by the Foreign Office in presenting a good propaganda case in relation to Hess's arrival reveal the dilemmas of the democratic propagandist at war.

II

The Foreign Office knew that the propaganda possibilities of the Hess affair lay ultimately in timely release of the news coupled with penetrating and

³⁶ Kenneth Young, ed., *The Diaries of Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart* (London, 1980), 98 (May 9, 1941).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 98 (May 11, 1941). See also entries for May 21, May 27, and May 30, 1941, 100–101.

³⁸ J. Roberts memo, June 4, 1941, FO 1093/10.

³⁹ Schmidt, “Marketing,” 64.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴¹ W. Strang to Cadogan, June 5, 1941, FO 1093/10.

⁴² Cooper to Lord Hood, June 9, 1941, INF 1/912.

accurate commentary. But it faced the difficulty that Hess's purpose was not immediately apparent. Intense interrogations took place over the days, weeks, and months following Hess's arrival, initially conducted by Ivone Kirkpatrick, Director of the Foreign Division of the MOI,⁴³ Major H. V. Dicks, a specialist in psychological medicine,⁴⁴ Lord Simon, Lord Chancellor,⁴⁵ and eventually Beaverbrook.⁴⁶ But these were frustrating and revealed little of real value. What could be ascertained and used as the basis for a direct, accurate propaganda campaign from a prisoner who was displaying signs of mental instability was limited indeed. Simon commented on Hess's fears that he was being poisoned and deliberately deprived of sleep and that he was to be the victim of an assassin.⁴⁷ The delay in establishing precise details that could inform an official statement meant that a window of opportunity was inevitably missed; Downing Street merely confirmed Hess's arrival on the evening of May 12. British propagandists had little room for maneuver, particularly as they wanted to avoid releasing details that might conflict with the "line" they would adopt "when the Hess material had been fully weighed and considered."⁴⁸ In the short term, then, they had to keep silent.

To many involved, this was a deeply unsatisfactory, although understandable, solution. While keeping the Germans guessing by saying and doing nothing—which was, bizarrely, the theme of Fleming's *The Flying Visit*—may have bought the British sufficient time to goad the Soviets, it had other consequences as well. By June 1941, some four weeks after Hess's arrival, officials began to look for a new propaganda strategy. Cadogan asked Con O'Neill, working within the Department for German Affairs in the Foreign Office, to prepare a dossier on potential propaganda lines on Hess. Advocating a program based on both overt and covert methods, O'Neill suggested extended use of "whispers," playing on the idea that "Hess came because he knew Germany could not win the war." Pointing to the delays in the interrogation, he argued that no "open" propaganda initiative could commence without "new facts." The "few facts already published," he correctly stated, had already "been sucked quite dry, and no more flesh can be got off these bones."⁴⁹ To encourage more speculation would not create an enduring impression. He suggested that the only solution would be an official statement

⁴³ Kirkpatrick's records of the interrogations, FO 1093/1; Kirkpatrick was selected for this role not because of his connections with the MOI but rather because he had met Hess during his time with the Foreign Office in Berlin.

⁴⁴ Medical statement on Hess's mental state, Major H. V. Dicks, December 12, 1941, FO 1093/7.

⁴⁵ Churchill, *Second World War*, 3:57.

⁴⁶ Schmidt, "Marketing."

⁴⁷ Lord Simon's account of interview with Hess, Lord Simon, June 10, 1941, FO 1093/1; see Major Stephens memo, BL ME/AD, June 10, 1941, KV 2/36.

⁴⁸ J. Roberts memo, June 4, 1941, FO 1093/10.

⁴⁹ Con O'Neill memo, June 22, 1941, FO 1093/7.

through the House of Commons—returning, ironically, to Cooper’s initial idea of May 14.⁵⁰

Here, the official propagandists encountered a serious problem, one at odds with their whole approach to the persuasive arts and one of the central dilemmas for the democratic propagandists of the Second World War. As O’Neill confessed, “the undiluted truth about the Hess case does not make good propaganda.” Ideally, the British would have preferred to report that “Hess is sane; [that] he has given important information on various subjects; [that] he is anxious for peace because he has lost his confidence in German victory; [and that] he is not an idealist or refugee, but a Nazi who has lost his nerve and faith in Hitler.”⁵¹ None of this was entirely true. The interrogations revealed that Hess was so infused with the spirit of working toward the Führer that he had undertaken his mission in order to please him, not to undermine him. During his interviews, he insisted that Britain was a spent force, that capitulation was inevitable, and that a negotiated peace was the only way to save British cities from the havoc wreaked on Rotterdam or Warsaw.⁵² As Nicolson commented, in his characteristically understated way, none of this would “help matters” when it came to presenting Hess’s mission to the public.⁵³ Cadogan, in particular, did not want to give any indication that Hess had arrived with a peace offer, preferring to “run the line that he has quarrelled with Hitler.” Public confirmation of a peace offer, suggested by Cooper on May 14, would corroborate “what the Germans put out this afternoon. . . . Hitler would breathe a sigh of relief. *And the German people*. They would say ‘Then it is true what our dear Führer has told us. Our beloved Rudolf has gone to make peace.’”⁵⁴ Cadogan wanted the German High Command to believe that Hess was “talking freely and on many subjects.”⁵⁵ Open discussion of Hess’s peace offer also held the danger that home-front morale would be affected: British Institute of Public Opinion polls in June 1941 revealed that 81.6 percent of those questioned would disapprove if Britain even considered peace negotiations with Germany.⁵⁶

Doubts about Hess’s sanity presented a further complication. If his arrival was to be used as a means of making the Germans believe that he was a traitor divulging state secrets, a public admission that he had lost his grip on reality

⁵⁰ *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan*, 379 (May 14, 1941).

⁵¹ Con O’Neill memo, June 22, 1941, FO 1093/7.

⁵² Lord Simon’s account of interview with Hess, June 10, 1941, FO 1093/1. See also interviews with Beaverbrook in W. P. Crozier, *Off the Record: Political Interviews, 1933–1943*, ed. A. J. P. Taylor (London, 1973), 226, and *The Diaries of Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart*, 254 (September 4, 1943).

⁵³ Nicolson, *Diaries*, 165 (May 16, 1941).

⁵⁴ *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan*, 379 (May 14, 1941).

⁵⁵ M. Strang to Sir M. Peterson, June 7, 1941, FO 371/26565.

⁵⁶ British Institute of Public Opinion Poll no. 78, June 1941, <http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/doc/3331/mrdoc/ascii/4106.txt>.

would only play into the hands of German propagandists by reinforcing the Reich Chancellery's second communiqué.⁵⁷ Dicks's report stated that Hess showed signs of severe depression—a diagnosis confirmed in June when Hess attempted suicide by throwing himself over a banister in his quarters. Dicks diagnosed that Hess was suffering from “a mental disorder,” specifically “paranoia (systematic delusional insanity).” His “prognosis for recovery” was “bad,” and he required “constant care and supervision, on account of a risk of suicide.”⁵⁸ Consequently, his pencil sharpeners and cutlery after mealtimes were removed, and shaving was to be permitted only by a “hospital orderly . . . in the presence of two officers.”⁵⁹ Simon also noted that Hess was “hypochondriacal”⁶⁰—a point seemingly corroborated by the astonishing array of medicines that Hess brought with him on the flight: aspirin, laxatives, caffeine tablets, barbiturates, antiseptics, Pervitin (a methamphetamine), opiates, homeopathic medicines, and air-sickness tablets.⁶¹ Nevertheless, O'Neill suggested that Hess's mental instability could be used as a propaganda advantage, serving to “emphasise his burden of guilt” about the “methods of the Gestapo” or as “the despair of a blunderer ashamed of his stupidity.” Moreover, the British public would be “gratified to learn that Hess has hurt himself.”⁶² While O'Neill's superiors questioned the desirability of releasing details of Hess's state of mind, they agreed that there would be benefits to making a statement, partly because it opened new avenues for “black propaganda” in Europe.⁶³ In this context, by July, Foreign Office officials suggested that Hess should do a radio broadcast, sanity and willingness permitting.⁶⁴ If not, Hess's letter to his son, written shortly after his capture, could be broadcast overseas, the propagandists having concluded that the final line of the document, that “‘there's a divinity that shapes our ends' . . . should find a disturbing echo in the minds of the German audience.”⁶⁵ That he had been able to write to his son would have the added advantage of publicly verifying his sanity. Failing that, O'Neill forwarded a more “fantastic suggestion”: that British propagandists could use the records of the interrogations and reconstruct Hess's voice, producing a short broadcast of his most pessimistic

⁵⁷ This was Cadogan's intended approach: *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan*, 379 (May 14, 1941). Cadogan's diaries also comment on Hess's sanity; see entries for May 13 (378) and June 17 (388).

⁵⁸ Medical statement on Hess's mental state, Major H. V. Dicks, December 12, 1941, FO 1093/7.

⁵⁹ Telegram to the Undersecretary of State at the War Office, May 15, 1941, WO 199/3288A, NA.

⁶⁰ Lord Simon's account of interview with Hess, June 10, 1941, FO 1093/1.

⁶¹ Medical Research Council report, FO 1093/10.

⁶² Con O'Neill memo, June 22, 1941, FO 1093/7.

⁶³ R. Makins to W. Strang, June 23, 1941, FO 1093/7.

⁶⁴ R. Makins memo, July 5, 1941, FO 1093/10.

⁶⁵ Con O'Neill memo, June 22, 1941, FO 1093/7.

passages “taken at random.” More excerpts, focusing on the air war, “minor gossip,” “notorious episodes in Nazi history,” and British propaganda to Germany could be elicited by stealth if his interrogators and psychologists were given permission to conduct more wide-ranging conversations than had hitherto been tolerated.⁶⁶ Significantly, the plan did not come to fruition, Hess’s mental state proving a barrier to propagandists wishing to capitalize on their prize.

However, there was a more fundamental concern that pointed to the dilemmas of the democratic propagandist at war. From the outset, British propaganda was represented as ethical as compared to the mendacious tactics of the enemy. Just fifteen days before Hess’s flight, Walter Monckton, Director General of the press and censorship bureau in the MOI, reaffirmed this position in a BBC broadcast: when safe to do so, the British government was committed to “tell nothing but the truth. The Germans have no such principle.” Government and people were bound in “a kind of partnership in which there is mutual confidence and co-operation” dependent on facts.⁶⁷ Such a position could not readily be abandoned with Hess’s arrival. Given that the Hess affair in its raw form did not make for good official propaganda, with the prisoner’s sanity in doubt and his mission for peace unpalatable, Cadogan recognized that if the British wanted to exploit his arrival, they would be forced to lie and that evidence would have to be distorted.⁶⁸ This meant that the strategy of “telling the truth, the whole truth, and, as far as possible, nothing but the truth” would be at stake, and it could not be sold out for short-term gains.

This was not a naive approach. The interwar period, with its revelations of falsified atrocities during the Great War, left a deep impression on British information policy makers. Propagandists also operated in an environment where technology, such as broadcasting, erased national borders and populations could no longer be isolated from alternative messages. As many studies of propaganda have shown, being exposed as a liar could jeopardize the relationship between propagandist and target that was vital to the success of any campaign. This was particularly true of the Hess case, where the fog of war was thick. O’Neill knew, when writing his paper for Cadogan, that “the most useful propaganda” was that consistent with the facts and, “as far as possible, with the truth,” admitting that it was “repugnant and disagreeable to distort the truth.”⁶⁹ He considered it morally and ethically unacceptable to steal the letter intended for Hess’s son for propaganda purposes. Moreover, for

⁶⁶ Ibid. See also the observations of O’Neill’s paper from June 27, 1941, which suggested that recorded interrogations were available and that Hess’s “voice is clearly recognizable. The record would have to be re-cut in a harder and more lasting substance. That can be done in London.” FO 1093/7.

⁶⁷ Monckton, BBC broadcast, April 25, 1941.

⁶⁸ *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan*, 386–87 (June 9 and 11, 1941).

⁶⁹ Con O’Neill memo, June 22, 1941, FO 1093/7.

propagandists to expose their own leaders to the risk of having their credibility undermined at home or on the world stage was not an option: the Foreign Office concluded that "the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs should [not] begin to be the medium for propaganda unless he is supported by the facts."⁷⁰ In this sense, Sefton Delmer was right to conclude that the Foreign Office "behaved as though Hess was some dangerous Trojan Horse planted in our midst, a booby trap which might explode in our faces at any moment."⁷¹ And this caution bolstered the credibility of propaganda in the longer term. Over time, British propagandists gained a reputation for telling the truth, which meant that their propaganda was believable (if not always wholly truthful). When the German people began to question official Nazi reports—significantly, a problem that became apparent during the Hess affair—they turned to the BBC for their news, despite the risk to their own safety: listening to foreign radio stations was a capital offense.⁷² In maintaining their attachment to truth, the British had an open channel of communications that served them well for the duration of the war.

In the short term, however, not all British propaganda agents took such a reticent approach. Excluded from the propaganda offensive by the Foreign Office, Delmer and his Political Warfare Executive black broadcasting unit took matters into their own hands, thus revealing the tensions between black and white propaganda agencies and pointing to the difficulties of identifying a single propaganda agency operating within the British establishment. Delmer's notorious underground radio station, Gustav Siegfried Eins, used the government's official silence to establish its reputation as an organ of propaganda, despite O'Neill's reservations about the potential effect of "black" broadcasts. Although secret broadcasting and whispers formed part of O'Neill's original proposal, serious doubts were raised about the efficacy of the former in releasing rumors about Hess. O'Neill himself argued that black propaganda "research units" functioned precisely because they were seen to be operating abroad, while in this case "the best information about Hess has to come from England."⁷³ Nevertheless, Delmer's announcer, "Der Chef," "was not subject to the restrictions of truthfulness and obedience to policy imposed on the BBC. If he had no facts, he could invent them. So it was up to him to get going and do his little bit to exploit the situation."⁷⁴ This did not go unnoticed in the mainstream media: the *Manchester Guardian* reported that

⁷⁰ Handwritten note, C.P., July 7, 1941, FO 1093/7.

⁷¹ Delmer, *Black Boomerang*. The idea of the "Trojan Horse" probably came from Hans Fritzsche's broadcast in May 1941: see SD Report 187, May 19, 1941, in Heinz Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, 17 vols. (Herrsching, 1984), 7:2315.

⁷² Leipzig SD report, May 17, 1941, cited in Noakes, ed., *Nazism*, 4:532.

⁷³ Con O'Neill memo, June 22, 1941, FO 1093/7.

⁷⁴ Delmer, *Black Boomerang*.

Gustav Siegfried Eins had been set up by Hess's allies in Germany in an attempt to undermine the Nazi-Soviet Pact.⁷⁵

The fact that Delmer's unit operated outside the official moratorium on propaganda relating to Hess, combined with the tensions between the executive, the MOI, and the Foreign Office, makes any narrative of a centrally controlled, coherent, and "expert" propaganda strategy problematic.⁷⁶ The Hess affair must necessarily be placed in this context. As the communications scholar Terence Qualter has shown of other democratic systems, the "notion of a cold, efficient, all-powerful national propaganda machine" is unsustainable. Rather, propagandists "spend as much time and energy fighting for survival and status within their own organisations as they do in pursuing their broader objectives." For Qualter, "Orwell's Ministry of Truth, assuredly riven by internal politics, would find its omnipotence clouded."⁷⁷ The British handling of the Hess affair provides an excellent case in point.

Qualter's observations are not confined to democracies, however. As has been noted, tensions emerged between the Reich Chancellery and the RMVP in the days following Hess's flight, with Goebbels seemingly disconnected from Hitler's inner circle and his competitor, Otto Dietrich, in charge of issuing the communiqués from the center. The British press reveled in the fact that German propaganda was "in a muddle,"⁷⁸ the *Manchester Guardian* observing that "Truthful Joe's propaganda department has been turning so many somersaults that the whole episode begins to have the appearance of a demented Catherine wheel, throwing off vast showers of sparks and vainly trying to spin in several different directions at once."⁷⁹ However, as time passed, Goebbels was, in fact, quietly elated as he moved to reassert his control over propaganda about the Hess flight. He knew that the flight had prompted "extreme anxiety" among the population, who were "rightly asking how such a fool could be second to the Führer." He feared that British propagandists would capitalize on their luck by fully exploiting the Hess affair on the world stage, but he also recognized that Churchill could not contemplate the idea of peace.⁸⁰ Denouncing Cooper as a "dilettante," he imagined himself on more than one occasion in the role of British Minister of Information: he "would have known what to do with it."⁸¹ Suspecting that the British did not, he predicted that "in a few weeks, no one will be speaking about it anymore."⁸² Just in case, on May 13, Goebbels instructed the German

⁷⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, June 17, 1941, 5.

⁷⁶ Schmidt, "Marketing," 68.

⁷⁷ Qualter, *Opinion Control*, 144.

⁷⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, May 16, 1941. Clippings Collection 101E, Wiener Library.

⁷⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, May 16, 1941, 3.

⁸⁰ Goebbels diary, May 14, 1941, in *Tagebücher*, 4:639–40.

⁸¹ See also Goebbels diary, May 15, 1941, in *Tagebücher*, 4:641.

⁸² Goebbels diary, May 14, 1941, in *Tagebücher*, 4:640–41.

media that "our job at the moment is to keep a stiff upper lip, not to react, not to explain anything, not to enter into polemics. . . . We must not let our wings droop in any way." He told the press to focus on military events, or alternatively to "work up . . . any murders or traffic accidents . . . into sensational stories,"⁸³ making it "possible to wipe out the whole affair easily in a relatively short space of time."⁸⁴ By May 15, Goebbels concluded that the British had chosen "shrewdly" to "let the lies run free," suggesting that, at this stage, the Foreign Office's plan was having the desired effect.⁸⁵ However, Goebbels decided that there was no need to don "our armor and strike out just yet," informing the press that his strategy was to "preserve calm and composure," particularly as the British were trying to "draw us out into the open." Nevertheless, the Reich should still prepare itself for a "drubbing."⁸⁶

Nothing came. Over the next few days, Goebbels felt the danger gradually fall away; on May 16, he commented that the "worst is behind us,"⁸⁷ and on May 17, that Hess was now facing a worse fate than being held in captivity, that of "being forgotten."⁸⁸ On May 19, he instructed the press that the affair was now "closed" and likened it to "a razor cut on the face of the German people": it might smart a little, but the wound would soon heal. To assembled journalists he declared that "the British have not done what I was first afraid of. I must confess to you today that I had a few sleepless nights when I pictured to myself what the British might make of the incident and what serious damage might be done to our international prestige. Characteristically, the British have let a golden opportunity go by, and have again proved themselves clumsy and short-sighted."⁸⁹ Rudolf Semmler, Goebbels's aide, confirmed that he was surprised that the British had decided not to play their "trump card" and that both Goebbels and Hitler had "held their breath in dismay at the thought of the gigantic catastrophe which Churchill could have brought about if he had used the Hess story with real propaganda skill."⁹⁰

At the press conference on May 19, Goebbels made particular reference to the state of German popular opinion. The British Foreign Office had hoped to shake German morale with their whisper campaigns. However, the Reich Minister confidently reasserted the primacy of the Führer by proclaiming that

⁸³ Semmler diary, May 14, 1941, in Semmler, *Goebbels*, 34.

⁸⁴ Press Conference, May 13, 1941, in Willi A. Boelcke, ed., *The Secret Conferences of Dr. Goebbels, October 1939–March 1943*, trans. E. Osers (London, 1967), 162.

⁸⁵ Goebbels diary, May 15, 1941, in *Tagebücher*, 4:641.

⁸⁶ Press Conference, May 15, 1941, in *Secret Conferences*, 163–64. The British press also reported on Goebbels's preemptive action: see *Manchester Guardian*, May 16, 1941, 8.

⁸⁷ Goebbels diary, May 16, 1941, in *Tagebücher*, 4:644.

⁸⁸ Goebbels diary, May 17, 1941 in *Tagebücher*, 4:645.

⁸⁹ Press Conference, May 19, 1941, in *Secret Conferences*, 165.

⁹⁰ Semmler diary, May 19, 1941, in Semmler, *Goebbels*, 34. The sense of shock and initial panic among the German High Command is well documented elsewhere: see, e.g., Kershaw, *Hitler*, 371–77.

Hess, or indeed any other individual, was inconsequential to the National Socialist movement, that Hitler alone had the ability to affect the core of their mission. While chatter continued, he claimed that "at home, the business has largely died down."⁹¹ Undoubtedly, Goebbels overstated the degree to which Germans had recovered from the event just nine days after the flight, particularly as stories continued to circulate. In what became known as "the month of rumours," there was speculation among the German people on the whereabouts of other leading personalities, imagining the flight of Himmler and Ley and the murder of others, Streicher and Darré, for their part in the Hess affair.⁹² The SD reports revealed "great alarm,"⁹³ and the communiqués were derided for being unrealistic, the population widely circulating a verse critiquing the official message: "There is a song all o'er the land: / we're setting out t'ward Engelland. / But if one should arrive by plane, / he'd surely be declared insane."⁹⁴ Even the party faithful experienced deep "despondency." Every district came up against a "tide of rumors and suppositions." The SD noted that by May 19 popular opinion was calming down, although there was still a sense of having been "knocked down," and uncertainty over the Hess affair remained.⁹⁵ Despite the RMVP's attempts to impose silence on the German people, rumors persisted into June. British intelligence continued to report that in Germany the Hess affair was "a severe blow to public confidence, and that Hitler's own prestige has suffered. It is claimed that Hitler was personally very upset and had said that he could never have a real friend. Workers in the Siemens factory in Berlin are said to have embraced each other on hearing of the flight of Hess." It was claimed too that "British radio was eagerly listened to on the Hess affair and fantastic rumors went into circulation about peace possibilities."⁹⁶ British propagandists were delighted to hear that it was discussed within foreign ministries across Europe;⁹⁷ even the Pope commented on it.⁹⁸

In a dictatorship, propaganda did not operate alone, however. Unlike the British, Goebbels had additional weapons: the terror apparatus and an aggressive censorship system. He embarked upon a determined campaign to erase the memory of the Deputy Führer: his images were removed from the walls

⁹¹ Press Conference, May 19, 1941, in *Secret Conferences*, 165.

⁹² Kershaw, *Hitler*, 374.

⁹³ SD Report 187, May 19, 1941, in *Meldungen*, 7:2313.

⁹⁴ Marlis G. Steinert, *Hitler's War and the Germans: Public Mood and Attitude during the Second World War*, trans. Thomas E. J. de Witt (Athens, OH, 1977), 99. See also Ian Kershaw, "How Effective Was Nazi Propaganda?" in *Nazi Propaganda: The Power and the Limitations*, ed. David Welch (London, 1983), 196.

⁹⁵ SD Report 187, May 19, 1941, in *Meldungen*, 7:2313.

⁹⁶ Political Intelligence Summary, 88, June 10, 1941, FO 371/29135.

⁹⁷ See, e.g., Political Intelligence Summary, 86, May 28, 1941; 87, June 4, 1941, FO 371/29135.

⁹⁸ Telegram from Mr. Osborne, No. 113, June 10, 1941, FO 371/30174.

of the Reich⁹⁹ and from newsreels, although some frames slipped through the net only to be met by a chorus of whistles, sporadic laughter, and taunts of “there’s the traitor” from unimpressed audiences.¹⁰⁰ By circulating the news of the arrest of Haushofer, Hess’s acquaintance and possible contact to Britain,¹⁰¹ and the forthcoming trial of Hess’s adjutants,¹⁰² Goebbels hoped to quash any potential rebellion or associated rumors. He used the opportunity to announce a crackdown on “quackery” and alternative medicine, thought to be the cause of Hess’s “otherness” within the party and of his subsequent betrayal: this “dubious swindle” was to be “stamped out” once and for all.¹⁰³ In the aftermath of the flight, “occult methods” were prohibited, particularly magnetotherapy, chiropractic medicine, and the use of dowsing rods and pendulums. Goebbels wickedly remarked that the *Hellseher* (“seers”) should have been able to prophesy their own arrest.¹⁰⁴ Yet despite this formidable repressive apparatus, Goebbels could not suppress rumors among the population. This need not have worried him in the short term, however. There was no serious challenge to Nazi authority and certainly no threat to Hitler’s position.¹⁰⁵ While the German people sympathized with the plight of the Führer at this terrible hour, they still did not doubt that the war would end in victory for the Reich.¹⁰⁶ Even the British admitted that “it would be a gross exaggeration to claim that the Hess affair is in itself likely to exert a profoundly disintegrating effect upon German morale.”¹⁰⁷ In any case, attention was soon focused on other matters, namely, the invasion of the Soviet Union.

III

If the Foreign Office propagandists created some chatter in Europe, they did not find similar successes in their aim to “play down the whole story at home.”¹⁰⁸ Whereas Churchill instructed that secret overseas propaganda could take “a rather more positive line,”¹⁰⁹ in Britain he gave the public and the press time to “have fun with facts.”¹¹⁰ The Foreign Office’s focus on overseas

⁹⁹ Security Service Intercept, CX/12500, June 18, 1941, 262, KV 36.

¹⁰⁰ SD Report 189, May 26, 1941, in *Meldungen*, 7:2344.

¹⁰¹ Political Intelligence Summary, 88, June 10, 1941, FO 371/29135.

¹⁰² For testimonies from the adjutants, see captured German records, GFM 334/821, NA.

¹⁰³ Goebbels diary, May 16, 1941, in *Tagebücher*, 4:643; see also Semmler diary, May 21, 1941, on the stories Goebbels took delight in circulating about Hess as a form of malicious gossip, in Semmler, *Goebbels*, 34–36.

¹⁰⁴ Proctor, *The Nazi War on Cancer*, 56.

¹⁰⁵ Leipzig SD report, May 17, 1941, cited in Noakes, ed., *Nazism*, 4:532.

¹⁰⁶ SD Report 186, May 15, 1941, in *Meldungen*, 7:2302. The same phrases are used in the Political Intelligence Summary, 85, May 21, 1941, FO 371/29135.

¹⁰⁷ Political Intelligence Summary, 86, May 28, 1941, FO 371/29135.

¹⁰⁸ Cooper to Lord Hood, June 9, 1941, INF 1/912.

¹⁰⁹ Strang to Sir M. Peterson, June 7, 1941, FO 371/26565.

¹¹⁰ Typed memo, n.d., FO 1093/7.

audiences arguably came at the expense of the propaganda benefits to be gained on the home front. This factor has not been considered in existing accounts of the Hess affair, which concentrate on the diplomatic significance of the propaganda initiatives.¹¹¹ The news of Hess's arrival, first released by the BBC and followed up with a brief statement to the House of Commons, soon gave rise to a flurry of media speculation that the government, like its German counterpart, was barely able to control. However, Britain faced the added disadvantage of a free press, able to express opinion, although bound by civil defense regulations. Whereas in Germany the official communiqués prompted rumors, in Britain the lack of official statements and the policy of letting the public "interpret the facts for themselves" led to speculation.

Gaumont British and other newsreel companies fueled chatter by intimating that Hess's arrival "may be a sign of dissension within the Nazi stronghold," a "fantastic trick" orchestrated by "cunning" opponents,¹¹² or an attempt "to negotiate a fifth column peace,"¹¹³ all ideas that later featured in popular rumors circulating in late May and June. Significantly, the newsreels began to screen patriotic and vitriolic stories about Hess. Gaumont British, for example, juxtaposed Hess's arrival with the bomb destruction in London, showing Westminster Cathedral enduring the "blasphemy of . . . barbarism."¹¹⁴ The narrator told viewers to "look at this picture of a maternity home that was bombed in France; look at the maimed and tortured bodies of little children: Nazis did this, and Rudolf Hess is a Nazi. Let us get all the information we can out of Rudolf Hess and then lock him up with the other rats."¹¹⁵ This had the desired effect: a Mass-Observation commentator recalled the text of the newsreel with remarkable precision and observed "an unusual amount of applause from the audience for a news item."¹¹⁶ British Paramount News reinforced Gaumont's line, declaring Hess to be "no hero, he is one of the thugs who shot, burned and tortured their way to power."¹¹⁷ In this way, the newsreels began to fill the void intentionally left by the government by generating their own propaganda and becoming key agents for a more direct form of campaigning. This was unhelpful. Not only did newsreel coverage fuel popular rumors, it also created tensions for a media unsure of its status as

¹¹¹ Kettenacker, "Mishandling a Spectacular Event"; Görtemaker, "The Bizarre Mission"; Schmidt, "Marketing."

¹¹² *Gaumont British News*, 768, May 15, 1941.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 769, May 19, 1941.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 768, May 15, 1941.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 769, May 19, 1941.

¹¹⁶ Commentator report, Topic Collection (TC) 14/1/C, Rudolf Hess, Mass-Observation Archive (M-O A). Mass-Observation was an organization set up in 1937 by Tom Harrisson, Charles Madge, and Humphrey Jennings to conduct an "anthropology or a science of ourselves." They collected data, diaries, and survey responses in order to gauge the mood, opinions, and attitudes of the British people.

¹¹⁷ *British Paramount News*, 1065, May 15, 1941.

national cheerleader in the aftermath of the dramatic events of May 1941. While some newsreel producers urged the government to make "good propaganda use of the desertion of Rudolf Hess,"¹¹⁸ others were "content to leave it to the authorities to decide."¹¹⁹ In an unexpected consequence of official strategy, the media began to scrutinize the line taken in official propaganda. The story became more about the government than about Hess himself.

As with news film, clear divisions emerged in the printed press, which unnerved officials. The *Manchester Guardian* recognized the government's attempt to keep the Nazis "guessing,"¹²⁰ as did the *Daily Star*: "no other course was possible," and a statement was not in the best interests of the nation. After all, "[Hess's] associates in Germany would dearly like to know what he has been saying, what he is doing, where he is."¹²¹ The *Daily Herald* undertook its own campaign to warn the Germans that "Hess knows all Hitler's secrets,"¹²² a phenomenon which became known as "Hessing." Conversely, in the clamor for a story, other newspapers chastised the government for maintaining its silence, warning of the "Hess Danger" and the effect of its "obstinacy" on Anglo-American relations and on potential fifth-column activity. Rumors needed to be dispelled, and quickly.¹²³ The government was told in no uncertain terms to "Stop the Hess Mystery!"¹²⁴ The *Daily Mail* demanded the publication of a photograph of the captive, a request denied for the course of the war,¹²⁵ resulting in extreme measures being taken by the more sensationalist newspapers. In October 1943, the Security Services began to track the movements of a photographer from the *Daily Mirror* who had been attempting to locate Hess. Hess was "confined to barracks" while the photographer was "dissuaded" from his mission, particularly as he was in possession of equipment that could photograph the Deputy Führer at a reasonable distance.¹²⁶ Such was the atmosphere in which British propagandists found themselves: unable and unwilling to make any firm statements, they were caught in a maelstrom of press speculation, with some journalists actively undermining their activities and criticizing the government. The sensitivity of the Hess case is attested to by the involvement of the Security Services in restraining the press. Even by 1943, two years after the flight itself, the photographer clearly felt that there continued to be a market for his wares, a belief indicative of

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ *Pathe Gazette*, 41/39, May 15, 1941.

¹²⁰ *Manchester Guardian*, May 19, 1941, Clippings Collection 101E, Wiener Library.

¹²¹ Extract from *Daily Star*, June 20, 1941, in HO 144/22492.

¹²² *Daily Herald*, May 13, 1941, Clippings Collection 101E, Wiener Library.

¹²³ Extract from *Daily Mail*, June 21, 1941, in HO 144/22492. See also *News Chronicle*, June 20, 1941, and *Daily Mail*, June 20, 1941 ("Still Hist! Hess") in HO 144/22492.

¹²⁴ *Daily Herald*, June 2, 1941, Clippings Collection 101E, Wiener Library.

¹²⁵ For discussions over the release of photographs, see INF 1/912.

¹²⁶ For the reports on this incident, see KV 2/37.

another by-product of letting the media have “their fun with the facts”: continued public interest.

As the case of the *Daily Mirror* photographer indicates, in addition to waving the flag, the media found that Hess offered significant commercial gains, demonstrating the multiple and complex levels on which publicity surrounding the flight operated. Such was the public fascination with the Hess flight and the reasons behind it that various businesses were able to capitalize on the new star. The comic singer Arthur Askey released a hit record, “Thanks for Dropping in Mr. Hess,” and the humorist writer A. P. Herbert wrote a poem for his 1941 collection *Let Us Be Glum*,¹²⁷ both of which drew on public speculation surrounding the extraordinary arrival. London’s Madame Tussaud’s Waxworks Museum erected a model of Hess in the lobby of their exhibition. As this suggests, the government could not hold back the tide of topical commentary and entertainment for long, particularly when the public demanded it.¹²⁸ Even the Foreign Office was urged to cash in on Hess’s celebrity: the literary agency Curtis Brown contacted the Under-Secretary of State in May 1942 to suggest that, should Hess be given permission to write his memoirs while in captivity, the “amounts arising therefrom might be very considerable” and could be requisitioned by the government.¹²⁹

In Britain, the allure of the Hess affair lasted until the end of the war in 1945. Such durability requires an explanation reaching beyond commercial exploitation. Initially the British public, like the authorities, was astonished at the news of the Hess landing. The incident and the press reaction generated a great deal of public interest. Initial “amazement” soon turned into “mystification.” The public was baffled about why Hess had arrived in Britain.¹³⁰ Mass-Observation reported that over 50 percent of those surveyed in the immediate aftermath were “unable or unwilling to profer [*sic*] any explanation.”¹³¹ Those who did fell back on rumors that were already circulating in the public sphere—suggestions of a split in the Nazi Party or of a personal disagreement between Hess and Hitler, speculation that Hess was afraid of being caught up in a putsch, even concerns that he was on a mission. These explanations aroused an unusual degree of suspicion and represented views that intensified over time.¹³²

¹²⁷ A. P. Herbert, *Let Us Be Glum* (London, 1941), 54.

¹²⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, June 3, 1941, 3.

¹²⁹ Curtis Brown to the Under-Secretary of State, Foreign Office, May 14, 1942, FO 371/30941.

¹³⁰ File Report (FR) 695, “Reactions to Hess,” May 13, 1941, M-O A.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² See FR 695, “Reactions to Hess,” May 13, 1941, and also FR 707, “Hess,” May 22, 1941, M-O A. In this last report, Mass-Observation estimated the percentages as follows: party split (13 percent on May 13; 11 percent on May 22) or personal disagreement with Hitler, fear of being caught up in the terror (22 percent on May 13; 17 percent on May 22), fears that Hess was on a mission (14 percent on May 13; 19 percent on May 22).

Much popular comment centered on the question of what should be done with the prisoner. Women in particular wished to see Hess meet an unfortunate end, suggesting that he be executed by the government or turned over either to the masses ("If I could only get my hands on him . . .") or to the Jews in revenge for their persecution by the National Socialist state. In one extreme case, a woman offered to put him "on a fork and gently [roast] him every five minutes."¹³³ Yet while feelings of violence toward Hess increased somewhat over the first two weeks of the affair, in general Hess was not "hated by the majority." In fact, many expressed feelings of "friendliness and kindness" toward him.¹³⁴ Letters to newspaper editors revealed bewilderment at some of the hate-filled pronouncements of the media and the public. Writing to the *Scotsman* on May 20, 1941, an anonymous reader suggested that these violent reactions brought British democrats close to the "ferocity" of their enemy, asking whether the nation would have been

gratified had they read . . . a report something like the following . . . "Rudolf Hess landed in Scotland on Saturday night. He was found by a labourer, who was armed with a pick-axe, with which he struck Hess, who was quite unarmed. Soldiers, members of the Home Guard, and other people arrived, and proceeded to stone Hess until the police, with great reluctance, intervened. He is now in solitary confinement, and being fed on bread and water. Just enough medical attention is being given to keep him alive until he has been forced, by various means, to divulge all he knows, but the British public may rest assured that he is suffering considerable, and richly deserved, pain."

The reader felt that the facts of the case were far more appropriate to a Christian nation: that the airman was noticed by the farmhand, who, spotting his injuries, took him into his home, sat him by the fireside, and offered him a cup of tea.¹³⁵

Whereas emotional reactions varied, suspicions over Hess's "mission" remained a constant.¹³⁶ Propagandists predicted a storm of rumor on the Continent, but it was arguably at home where the greatest impact was felt. As Mass-Observation noted, wild speculation began to dominate public discourse on the Hess affair, leading individuals to write to the Home Office and the Security Services to express their views. These letters tended to fall into distinct categories, the dominant ones relating to fears of Hess and to his treatment. Naturally, what prompted individuals to contact the authorities may not be revealed by the available evidence. Often the letters were addressed directly to the Minister of Home Security, Herbert Morrison, or to high-ranking officials in other departments, the informers seeking to gain the

¹³³ FR 695, "Reactions to Hess," May 13, 1941, M-O A.

¹³⁴ FR 707, "Hess," May 22, 1941, M-O A.

¹³⁵ *Scotsman*, May 20, 1941, 4.

¹³⁶ FR 707, "Hess," May 22, 1941, M-O A.

attention of the highest authority in the hope of ensuring that prompt action was taken. This could be interpreted as indicative of the level of anxiety that individuals were experiencing or as a reflection of the their own personalities, or both. The identities by which authors wished to be known and understood by the letter's recipient may reveal something of their motivation. While some writers gave their name and address freely, a number assigned themselves a patriotic pseudonym or signed off simply as "an honest to goodness Briton"¹³⁷ or a "loyal British citizen."¹³⁸ Others were more direct. For example, the Security Service intercepted a number of letters written to Hess himself. Their authors ranged from religious extremists in the United States to individuals whom the Security Services classed as "eccentrics" or "mentally disturbed" to pacifists, who wrote to welcome Hess to Britain as a "Saviour of Humanity" in the belief that he was on a peace mission.¹³⁹ Clearly, these were minority views. However, what of the broader array of letters sent by the public to the authorities? How representative were they of popular opinion? Members of the public who write to ministers or senior officials are unlikely to be representative, and it is possible that the material that survives was distinguished by its peculiarity. However, the letters appear to give examples of more specific articulations of the broader, frequently voiced fears picked up by organizations such as Mass-Observation, which in turn mirrored general apprehension among the population centering on invasion, fifth-column activity, and attacks on British leaders, alongside more selfish, personal concerns relating to rationing and equal treatment.

It was only natural that the public should interpret the lack of detail in official statements about Hess as an ominous sign, partly because some elements of the press encouraged them to do so and partly because, in general, the public is suspicious of those in power and tends to fall back on conspiracy theories when major and, in particular, bizarre or incomprehensible events occur. Following the Silent Column campaign of the previous year, the public were attuned to the possibility of an underground fifth column.¹⁴⁰ Some speculated that Hess's arrival was a sign for agents to begin their subversive activities and bring down the nation from within. They began to connect unrelated events and wrote in to share their suspicions with the government: the perceived increase in bombing raids, for example, led to conclusions that

¹³⁷ Letter from an "honest to goodness Briton" to the Home Secretary, May 18, 1941, HO 144/229492.

¹³⁸ Helen Haughton (SW1) to the Minister of Home Security, May 13, 1941, HO 144/229492.

¹³⁹ Intercepted letters to Hess, KV 2/34.

¹⁴⁰ The Silent Column campaign was initiated by Churchill in July 1940 and focused on security breaches caused by gossip and passing on information. This fueled public suspicion that a fifth column was operating within the United Kingdom: see PREM 4/ 37/9A, NA Churchill to Lt.-Col. Jacob, July 3, 1940, for the initiation of the campaign and INF 1/249, MOI Planning Committee Minutes, 1940–41 for its course.

either an invasion was on the horizon or that fifth columnists had already infiltrated aerodromes.¹⁴¹ Others suspected that before his departure from Germany Hess had been appointed as head of internal operations in Britain by the Nazi leadership,¹⁴² or that his family had traveled with him and his wife was now organizing a separate fifth-column cell deep within the British countryside.¹⁴³ Some offered more fantastic suggestions—that, for example, the instructions for his mission were written in invisible ink on the inside of his parachute, which should be “subjected to the most searching tests” available.¹⁴⁴ One particular fear that emerged with some regularity was that Hess had come to Britain to assassinate the Prime Minister. Many worried citizens contacted the Minister for Home Security, anxious that Hess should be kept at a safe distance from Churchill.¹⁴⁵ Again, far-fetched stories emerged of a possessed Deputy Führer lunging at the British leader with a poisoned ring.¹⁴⁶ Poisoning was the leitmotif of such fears, which might have been of interest to officers of the Security Services since they knew that Hess had come armed with a plane-full of drugs and so-called alternative therapies.¹⁴⁷

Such apprehension surrounding the personal well-being of the Prime Minister emphasizes the importance of leadership to Britons at war and how the average citizen had come to equate Churchill’s premiership with the outcome of the conflict. In addition, such reactions seem to reveal a certain degree of paranoia or suspicion fueled both by the government’s failure to provide an adequate explanation for the Hess affair and by public fascination with espionage, fifth-column activity, and spies. Mass-Observation reported the increasing popularity of the war-based fantasy novel, Peter Fleming’s fictional tale of Hitler parachuting into Britain being one of the most successful of these publications.¹⁴⁸ It is unsurprising, therefore, that some Britons should indulge in wild theories on the arrival of his deputy in May 1941, particularly since a detailed explanation of events was not forthcoming from the executive.

¹⁴¹ Anonymous letter to the Home Office, HO 144/22492. See also other letters relating to fifth-column activity in HO 144/22492, and reports from postal censorship, May 27, 1941, INF 1/912.

¹⁴² M. Hiley, Halifax, to Herbert Morrison, May 13, 1941, HO 144/22492.

¹⁴³ M. E. Greaves, Cheltenham, to the Ministry of Home Security, May 21, 1941, HO 144/22492.

¹⁴⁴ Letter from V. R. Luskington, Sussex, to the Ministry of Home Security, May 15, 1941, HO 144/22492.

¹⁴⁵ In June 1941, Churchill received an approval rating of 86.6 percent. BIPO Poll, no. 78. June 1941, UK Data Archive, <http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/doc/3331/mrdoc/ascii/4106.txt>.

¹⁴⁶ Former member of the Security Service to Major D. Morton, May 20, 1941. This also manifested itself in other types of poisoning incidents: see postal censorship report, May 27, 1941, INF 1/912, and Ronald Wells to J. M. Ross at the Home Office, May 20, 1941, HO 144/22492.

¹⁴⁷ For example, Dr. J. F. G. Turner in Camberley to the Security Services, May 13, 1941, and J. Mair, Lieutenant Major for the Scottish Regional Section, to Major T. A. Robertson, May 13, 1941, KV 2/34.

¹⁴⁸ FR 968. Draft Article for *Horizon*, Tom Harrisson, November 1941, M-O A.

Moreover, it meant that the “general mass doubt about the future” uncovered by Mass-Observation in August of the same year was not being allayed by the government. This left individuals to search for answers both individually and collectively: “people want to believe in something which at least *appears* to interpret events in the complex and dangerous civilization in which uneducated people find themselves confused, worried, many of their certainties weakened.”¹⁴⁹ In short, the public sought meaning on its own, however far from the truth or from logic, when the government failed to provide an interpretation of contemporary events.

Such fears and doubts prompted extreme responses. Members of the public, unsure of the meaning of Hess’s arrival, feared for the safety of the nation. It was in this environment that a number of correspondents expressed a desire, also reported in Mass-Observation, to cause Hess harm, with mob mentality seeming to dominate.¹⁵⁰ This was a particular cause for concern among members of the War Cabinet, who already feared a breakdown of civil authority and a resultant collapse of civilian morale. That fear was most clearly expressed by their reaction to the Bethnal Green underground railway disaster of 1943, which left 173 dead. The notes of the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Edward Bridges, revealed a deep mistrust of public behavior. Despite the rhetoric pronouncing faith in the British public’s levelheadedness in the face of adversity, privately some members of the War Cabinet suggested that the death of so many people would affect public morale, provide an opportunity for “propaganda by disaffected local people,” and prompt reprisals against those popularly and falsely thought responsible, in this case supposed fifth-column activists, fascists, young hooligans, or East End Jews. Here, the primary threat came from within rather than without.¹⁵¹ Significantly, in both the Hess case and the Bethnal Green tube disaster, it was the lack of any official information except for a short statement to the House that created rumor and demands for mass action.¹⁵² Yet while public interest was a concern, there was no compulsion for the government to give out any information: as Bridges noted, “War cond[itio]ns are diff[eren]t from Peace.”¹⁵³

In relation to the Hess affair, mob mentalities centered on revenge, resentment, and fear. Memories of the Great War surfaced, with some former soldiers writing to government departments to demand the same treatment for a new prisoner of war that they received at the hands of the Germans in

¹⁴⁹ FR 812, “Mass Astrology,” August 1941, M-O A.

¹⁵⁰ Reports from postal censorship, May 27, 1941, INF 1/912.

¹⁵¹ Bridges’s (Cabinet Secretary) Notebook, March 8, 1943, CAB 19/52, NA. For details of rumors surrounding the Bethnal Green tube disaster, see FR 1650, “Morale,” March 1943, M-O A.

¹⁵² On the proposed government response to the Bethnal Green tube disaster, see War Cabinet Minutes, April 5, 1943, CAB 65/34/2.

¹⁵³ Bridges’s notebook, March 8, 1943, CAB 19/52.

1914–18.¹⁵⁴ Ironically, given that a good number of reports condemned Hess for his role in promoting the Nazi terror and atrocities, echoing the fears of the author of the letter to the *Scotsman*, some letters reflected an authoritarian mentality, suggesting summary execution or imprisonment. This extended to anyone suspected of fifth-column activity or odd behavior: “Do you not agree that the Government has the finest opportunity *now* to round up all those who *might* be in sympathy with the movement and consider that all those who have a *good word* to say about Hess, should be rounded up and put into concentration camps?”¹⁵⁵ However, Mass-Observation reported that individuals often felt safe to express such desires in the knowledge that they would not and could not be acted upon within a democracy. In this case, it was interpreted as an expression of anger and frustration rather than a direct incitement to violent action, thus demonstrating that fears of mass reprisals were ultimately unfounded.¹⁵⁶

Distinctions should be made among the various sentiments displayed by the British public. Fear was a public-sphere motivation: the citizen was potentially writing to the authorities for the greater good, attempting to contribute to the war effort, sharing thoughts and offering warnings, just in case. Resentment, however, was primarily a personal concern, although one that arguably had wider social ramifications. As with the “fear” responses, there were clear connections with press coverage: the public acted as a mouthpiece for the editors they read and agreed with, approaching the authorities directly to make their concerns heard. First, the general conditions in which Hess was being kept seemed to many to be a matter for the public to decide. The BBC report that Hess was “resting nicely” and “comfortable” aroused some anger, making one listener “want to vomit. Give the bastard a seat in the middle of Plymouth one night of the Blitz.”¹⁵⁷ The experience of living through the war prompted some to suggest that Hess should face the same fate, to get a taste of what the Germans had been meting out for the past two years: bombing, hunger, terror, the loss of loved ones. Hess should not, they argued, be treated with “kid gloves.”¹⁵⁸ Rumors that he was exempt from rationing of both clothes and food caused particular consternation. From early on the *Sunday Express* had been reporting that Hess was living in “luxurious” conditions, that he was a waste of resources (thirty men had to guard him at any one time), and that he was making unreasonable demands for wine, fish, fresh eggs, and

¹⁵⁴ Anonymous letter to the Home Office and Helen Haughton (SW1) to the Minister of Home Security, May 13, 1941, HO 144/229492.

¹⁵⁵ Letter from an “honest to goodness Briton” to the Home Secretary, May 18, 1941, HO 144/22492. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁵⁶ FR 1944, “Fortnightly Bulletin (17),” October 1943, M-O A.

¹⁵⁷ Reports from postal censorship, May 27, 1941, INF 1/912.

¹⁵⁸ Helen Haughton (SW1) to the Minister of Home Security, May 13, 1941, HO 144/229492.

chicken, which were willingly “spread lavishly before him.”¹⁵⁹ They asked whether he had been issued with extra clothing coupons for his “Bond Street Tailor,” who was reportedly providing him with fine suits while Britons had to “make do and mend.”¹⁶⁰ Such sentiments were reflected in public letters. Readers repeated the exact phrases used in the *Express*, contrasting Hess’s menu with what they themselves received and what the “Boys” at the front were eating and infusing their narratives with tales of Nazi atrocities and familiar rumors (“Heaven must smile at the simplicity—or stupidity—of England giving such a vile murderer chicken and tending him with care when one scarcely knows what duplicity he is up to”; “his hands is [*sic*] stained with the blood of all the poor Polish people who he has murdered and just think of him getting chicken and fish, mind you. Chicken is 9 shillings”).¹⁶¹ Mass-Observation also noted this trend, one respondent commenting that “if Hitler came, he’d be given strawberries and cream.”¹⁶²

Just as the public’s reactions to Hess’s arrival reflected their fears of an attack on their leadership, their outrage at his special treatment revealed a general discontent about wartime measures such as rationing, suggesting that the affair served as a vehicle for the public to articulate other concerns as well as to express anger at the Nazis. Their concerns were not necessarily about Hess himself, but about the war in general. Rather than merely tracking popular reactions to a given event—the most frequently used model for interpreting popular opinion—it may be profitable to examine how these reactions expressed deeper, more fundamental concerns about conflict and the everyday experience on the home front. Such an examination may also illustrate the complex manner in which the public interacted with the government message. The propagandee cannot simply be defined as a hapless victim, subject to the whim of the propagandist. For the British public, the Hess affair opened a channel of communication to the government—illustrating Qualter’s theory that rather than subverting the democratic voice, propaganda can play a positive role as “an instrument for bringing the population to an awareness that it is a democracy.”¹⁶³

The Hess affair also allows an examination of the passage and longevity of rumor, as opposed to topical opinion—one of the more evasive effects of propaganda for the scholar to track, due to the many levels on which it exists. Naturally, the lack of detail in official statements on Hess’s arrival encouraged the public and the press to fill the silences for themselves and to mirror each

¹⁵⁹ *Sunday Express*, May 18, 1941, Clippings Collection 101E, Wiener Library.

¹⁶⁰ *Sunday Express*, May 27, 1941, Clippings Collection 101E, Wiener Library. See also “Lucio” for a critique of this view, *Manchester Guardian*, January 10, 1942, 5.

¹⁶¹ Reports from postal censorship, May 27, 1941, INF 1/912.

¹⁶² FR 695, “Reactions to Hess,” May 13, 1941, M-O A.

¹⁶³ Qualter, *Opinion Control*, 127. This also fits with Ellul’s idea of sociological propaganda: *Propaganda*.

other's views, creating a self-sustaining environment. But how long could this continue? Mass-Observation detected a point at which the public could not speculate about Hess's motives without new information to embellish their suspicions. This did not mean that interest in Hess had diminished, however.¹⁶⁴ Rumor about him continued to circulate after the initial press reaction died down: some began to doubt that Hess had actually come, particularly as no photograph was ever published;¹⁶⁵ some thought that he had been sent back to Germany, in a parallel to the fictional Fleming story;¹⁶⁶ some thought that others, such as Goering, were on their way.¹⁶⁷ When new events occurred, such as the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, rumors immediately spread that Hess was involved.¹⁶⁸ The reasons for the sustained interest in the Hess affair are numerous. Part of the explanation is that the matter was not effectively concluded by a detailed official statement about why Hess flew to Britain. Such a statement was eventually issued in May 1943,¹⁶⁹ but this only aroused further suspicion. Without knowing the full circumstances British propagandists had faced in May 1941, and generally critical of information policy anyway, the public concluded that the affair had been "handled . . . very badly," a view reflected in some historians' accounts of the affair.¹⁷⁰ "The crux of the matter," Mass-Observation noted, "would seem to be that, if the facts were indeed as they are stated to be, there was no reason why a full statement should not have been made at the time, and people are, therefore, naturally suspicious of an explanation offered at so late a date."¹⁷¹ As I have already argued, British propaganda policy was constrained by the facts of the case and the administrative and strategic context. Now that suspicions had been allowed to build over months and even years and so many conspiracy theories had been articulated, the rather mundane official story was bound to be greeted with apathy by some and disbelief by others.

The use of the Hess affair by the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) also helps explain its longevity. The party sought to keep the Hess mystique alive since it served their own interests or those of their political masters and allowed them to connect home-front rumor with propaganda abroad. The Communists used Hess as a symbol for Western capitalism, as a tool for putting pressure on the British at key moments in the war, and as a means of explaining the war within a specific ideological framework. In the aftermath

¹⁶⁴ FR 707, "Hess," May 22, 1941, M-O A.

¹⁶⁵ FR 729, "First Weekly Report," June 1941, M-O A.

¹⁶⁶ FR 738, "Second Weekly Report," June 1941, M-O A.

¹⁶⁷ FR 811, "Ninth Weekly Report," August 1941, M-O A. Jokes on this subject were also in circulation in May 1941, as noted in Nicolson's *Diaries*, May 17, 1941, 210.

¹⁶⁸ FR 765, "Fourth Weekly Report," June 1941, M-O A.

¹⁶⁹ See *Manchester Guardian*, September 23, 1943, 2.

¹⁷⁰ Kettenacker, "Mishandling a Spectacular Event"; Görtemaker, "The Bizarre Mission."

¹⁷¹ FR 1944, "Fortnightly Bulletin (17)," October 1943, M-O A.

of the flight, the CPGB seized upon the supposed involvement of the Duke of Hamilton, who Hess had declared was his contact in the United Kingdom.¹⁷² Nicolson knew the political capital of Hess's request to see Hamilton, noting in his diary on May 13, 1941: "You can image what a difficult publicity problem that entails."¹⁷³ At a meeting in London and in leaflet propaganda, the CPGB leader, Harry Pollitt, and his associates accused the aristocracy of close association with the Nazis, contending that they were united by the forces of imperialism, plutocratic governance, and capitalism. The Communists' publicity mirrored views already circulating in letters to the Ministry of Home Security and the Secret Services that sought to implicate Unity Mitford¹⁷⁴ and Hamilton.¹⁷⁵ Repeating the story of "chicken, fish and wine," the Communists sought to inspire anger among the average working man, who, they claimed, would "shoot" Hess if they had the chance. Stoking rumors about Hess's mission, they proclaimed that he had come to Britain to seek out his aristocratic pals in order to discuss "with influential Ruling Class persons, on the policy to draw the War to a close and re-orient the front against the Soviet Union." The People's Convention of Communists suggested that negotiations of this nature were taking place behind closed doors between Hess and the elites, who shared a desire to crush working-class movements by annihilating the only nation that stood for their rights, the Soviet Union.¹⁷⁶ Alun Thomas informed the London district committee that the current conflict was "an imperialist war in which the rich are getting richer and the poor, poorer, both here and in Germany." He urged his countrymen to "come to an understanding with the Soviet Union and put an end to this war and out of these ruins can come the destruction of capitalism in Europe completely and lead to a New World and establish Federal States in Europe as the only way out."¹⁷⁷ In addition to promoting public resentment toward Hess and suspicion of the ruling elites, such allegations resulted in a court case for defamation of character that was brought by the Duke of Hamilton against Pollitt and his associates in June 1941 and that lasted into 1942. Pollitt's lawyers declared that the Communists merely repeated statements released by the BBC in the immediate aftermath of Hess's arrival, which indicated that the Deputy Führer

¹⁷² The involvement of the Duke of Hamilton in Hess's flight has been the subject of much speculation. See, e.g., Martin Pugh, *"Hurrah for the Blackshirts": Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars* (London, 2005). While Hamilton, as Lord Clydesdale, had been a member of the Anglo-German Fellowship, it appears from his personal papers that he did not know of or play a role in Hess's flight. Hamilton Papers, RH 4/202, National Archives of Scotland.

¹⁷³ Nicolson, *Diaries*, 210 (May 13, 1941).

¹⁷⁴ W. J. Harbord to Morrison, May 16, 1941, HO 144/22492.

¹⁷⁵ Reports from postal censorship, May 27, 1941, INF 1/912.

¹⁷⁶ See, e.g., "Statement of Solidarity with the Soviet Union," June 22, 1941, CP/IND/POLL/2/8, Communist Party of Great Britain Archive.

¹⁷⁷ Police report from Superintendent May on meeting in June 1941, HO 144/22492.

had attempted to contact the Duke.¹⁷⁸ Pollitt and his lawyers argued that, since no direct propaganda denouncing Hess had been forthcoming, it was the Communists' "patriotic duty to point out that Hess was an utterly depraved and vicious character . . . a man with whom no decent person would at any time be associated."¹⁷⁹ The Court ruled that the BBC's statement had been misinterpreted, and Pollitt was forced to offer an apology. The case was covered widely in the press, thus keeping the Hess affair in the headlines and contributing to the longevity of rumors.¹⁸⁰ This phenomenon was not confined to the United Kingdom. The Duke pursued similar published allegations in the United States with the same consequences.¹⁸¹

The Pollitt trial was indicative of both the endurance of the Hess affair in Britain and its fascination for the Soviet Union. While, as Schmidt argued, the initial exploitation of the Hess affair to put pressure on the Soviet Union met with some success, the long-term effects were more damaging to Anglo-Soviet relations.¹⁸² Like the British public, the Soviets were suspicious of the official silence on Hess's arrival, and their suspicion lasted well into 1942 and beyond. In particular, the Soviet leadership could not understand why the British government was so unwilling to denounce Hess publicly, and they suspected that secret negotiations were under way to agree on peace terms with Germany and leave the Soviet Union at their mercy. Why was Hess in contact with members of the aristocracy? Why was Hess not to be tried, preferably in a show trial, and publicly hanged on Parliament Square? Why were the British delaying in opening up the Second Front? Why, if there was nothing underhand going on, was there any mystery about Hess? Why not make the full facts publicly known?¹⁸³ Such doubts were exacerbated by the publication of an article in the German newspaper *Die Zeitung* in October 1942 in which Goebbels revived the Hess story in order to suggest that the Deputy Führer's flight had been part of Hitler's grand plan to undermine the possibility of alliance with the British in advance of Operation Barbarossa.¹⁸⁴ Initially, Goebbels's move baffled the Foreign Office.¹⁸⁵ However, by the end

¹⁷⁸ Court transcripts, *Duke of Hamilton v. Harry Pollitt and Ed Bramley*, Hamilton Papers, RH 4/202, National Archives of Scotland. See also the Harry Pollitt papers, CP/IND/POLL/15/07, Communist Party of Great Britain Archive.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ See, e.g., *Manchester Guardian*, February 19, 1942, 2; *Times*, February 19, 1942, 8.

¹⁸¹ See, e.g., *Duke of Hamilton v. P. van Paassen, Dial Press Inc. and Omnibook Inc.*, District Court of New York, December 1942, and *Duke of Hamilton v. Redfern Collins*, November 4, 1943, Hamilton Papers, RH 4/202, National Archives of Scotland. This was also covered in the British press. See, for example, *Manchester Guardian*, March 20, 1943, 4, and *Times*, March 20, 1943, 4.

¹⁸² Schmidt, "Marketing."

¹⁸³ Sir A. Clark Kerr telegram, October 25, 1942, FO 371/33036.

¹⁸⁴ *Die Zeitung*, October 9, 1942, FO 371/30941.

¹⁸⁵ Notes on *Die Zeitung* article, October 1942, FO 371/30941, NA.

of the month, the RMVP's strategy seemed to be paying dividends,¹⁸⁶ with the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* accusing the British of establishing a "haven for gangsters." British diplomats interpreted this "hymn of hate" as a hostile act and were left wondering whether Stalin was preparing for an aggressive announcement on the anniversary of the Revolution.¹⁸⁷ Sensing that any perceived tensions within the alliance would play into Hitler's hands, intense discussions with Ivan Maisky, the Soviet Ambassador to London, and with Stalin himself ensued. It gradually emerged that the Soviets' "real grievance" was related to the Second Front, and it became clear that, like the Communists in Britain and indeed like the British public itself, the Soviet leadership was using the Hess affair as a mechanism by which they could express other areas of discontent, fear, or frustration. Even the 1942 *Pravda* scandal did not mark the end of the Hess affair. The Soviets went on the offensive once again in 1943 when the *Daily Mail* published an article on Hess's living conditions. Newspapers both at home and abroad worked themselves into a fever pitch over revelations by Bracken, while on a goodwill trip to New York in the same year, about the circumstances of the Hess flight, a move felt by the Foreign Office to have "opened the floodgates" to a further "crop of parliamentary questions" and speculation.¹⁸⁸ That Hess was recalled with regularity well after the flight itself reflects how he remained a "skeleton in the cupboard" whose bones could be rattled every so often by European propagandists and diplomats¹⁸⁹ to remind the world of his continued existence: he remained a useful weapon in the arsenal of diplomats and propagandists alike. This process was sustained after 1945: Hess still played a role in the new political debates of the Cold War simply by virtue of his existence in Spandau, which contributed to tensions between East and West long after his arrival in Scotland.¹⁹⁰

IV

Propaganda surrounding the Hess affair was characterized by complexity, both in the immediate aftermath of his flight to Scotland and in the longer term. It becomes difficult to claim that the British "mishandled" this event, since they found themselves in an impossible situation.¹⁹¹ Hess's arrival was not a propaganda coup in its own right, given that the facts of the case

¹⁸⁶ The link between the article in *Die Zeitung* and increased Soviet activity in relation to the Hess affair was made by the Foreign Office on October 27, 1942, C 9971/1899/18, FO 371/30941.

¹⁸⁷ Sir A. Clark Kerr telegram, October 30, 1942, FO 371/33036.

¹⁸⁸ Notes on Bracken's statements, September 1, 1943, FO 371/34484.

¹⁸⁹ Sir A. Clark Kerr telegram, October 25, 1942, FO 371/33036.

¹⁹⁰ For a full account of this, see Norman J. W. Goda, *Tales from Spandau: Nazi Criminals and the Cold War* (Cambridge, 2007).

¹⁹¹ Kettenacker, "Mishandling."

were so problematic. Moreover, the bureaucratic tensions between propaganda agencies in Britain and Germany in May 1941 obviated a direct and explicit propaganda line. As Qualter has shown, propagandists are often engaged in “heated battles” for control of the message, which can affect public communications.¹⁹² The fight for “survival and status” had the potential to undermine the formulation of a coordinated message so important to a direct and successful propaganda campaign. This was the case in both Britain and Germany, and it is thus more telling of the dynamics of bureaucracies than of the nature and organization of democratic or authoritarian states.

The Hess affair also marked a critical moment for propagandists. In Britain, the failings and weaknesses of the Ministry of Information were laid bare. A change was required in terms of both personnel and mission. The appointment of Bracken in July 1941, given his status as Churchill’s confidante and his good relations with the press, breathed new life into British propaganda campaigns, creating a belief that their “ethical” approach to the persuasive arts could pay dividends. Goebbels, on the other hand, found that Dietrich was a formidable adversary. The lack of coordination between the RMVP and the Reich Chancellery in the public statements surrounding Hess’s departure was portentous: five months later, in October 1941, Dietrich disastrously announced that the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse, undermining Goebbels’s psychological preparations for a long, hard war. The Hess affair also revealed the limitations of propaganda in authoritarian states. That Goebbels was forced to turn to aggressive censorship and repression only pointed to the ultimate impotence of his propaganda machine. His attempts to close down the space for debate and speculation were equally unsuccessful. Despite his numerous strategies for erasing Hess’s memory from the popular imagination, rumors continued to circulate in defiance of National Socialist edicts, ultimately pointing to the Nazis’ inability to control natural human behaviors and impulses.

Britain too failed to manage the spread of rumor. Official silences and tensions between propaganda agencies created a void that was filled by media and public conjecture and commentary. Indirect and unofficial channels, such as newspapers and newsreels, became agents of propaganda, leading the patriotic charge of May and June 1941. This challenges the view that propaganda emanates only from within an organized executive structure and affirms the need for new definitions of propaganda to reflect its malleability and fluidity.¹⁹³ Propaganda agents can be varied and

¹⁹² Qualter, *Opinion Control*, 144.

¹⁹³ David R. Willcox, *Propaganda, the Press, and Conflict: The Gulf War and Kosovo* (London, 2005), 18.

can originate from “above” or “below”; hence incentives to influence broader opinion are not always political or ideological. A new focus for modern studies of propaganda is required. The motivations for various agents to become embroiled in the Hess affair cannot necessarily be classed as selfless, patriotic, or in the public interest: great benefits could also be derived from exploiting the Hess myth for financial gain, as seen in the entertainment industry, or using it to project other, unrelated needs and desires. That the public used the Hess affair for this purpose overturns the traditional view of the propagandist’s target as a victim. The process of propaganda becomes reciprocal. If propaganda is to be defined as the “act of advancing a cause” either consciously or unconsciously,¹⁹⁴ public manipulation of Hess’s arrival to further unrelated, yet pressing, concerns may represent a less well known form of persuasion. Significantly, when seen in this light, propaganda becomes key, rather than anathema, to the democratic process. Propaganda can therefore be defined as “a creative transaction in which the persuadee takes an active part in constructing meaningful responses to . . . the persuader’s appeal,” as was the case in Britain in relation to the Hess affair.¹⁹⁵ Alternatively, as J. Michael Sproule has noted in relation to communications in the twentieth-century United States, propaganda can create opportunities to point to the limits of opinion control and the resilience of the public’s preexisting views and beliefs. Sproule questions “how much intellectuals should act on their convictions that symbolic manipulation is dampening democracy.”¹⁹⁶ As the Second World War reveals, propaganda could prompt as well as release the democratic voice.

Finally, propaganda historians should seek to investigate the afterlife of propaganda more frequently, since the most profound effects are often concealed by studies that concentrate on immediate outcomes. Well after 1941, Hess was still being used as a weapon, deployed at strategic moments during the course of war. As “Lucio,” writing in the *Manchester Guardian*, commented: “The chiefest [*sic*] point is we have got him where desired: Rudolf in his present joint is to be called for ‘when required.’”¹⁹⁷ That the Hess flight held a public fascination meant that it was perfect for this task. It was used by participants, whether members of the public or those acting in an official capacity such as the Communist Party or the Soviet Union, as a vehicle to convey broader concerns, fears, and agen-

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 22

¹⁹⁵ Dan Nimmo, *Political Communication and Public Opinion in America* (Santa Monica, CA, 1978), in Qualter, *Opinion Control*, 110.

¹⁹⁶ J. Michael Sproule, *Propaganda and Democracy: The American Experience of Media and Mass Persuasion* (Cambridge, 1997), 270.

¹⁹⁷ *Manchester Guardian*, January 10, 1942, 5.

das—in short, to express things that really mattered once it became clear that Hess's mission was pointless and that the information he had to offer was of little use. Ultimately Hess was of no real significance in his own right, despite the initial promise offered by his arrival. Although Goebbels was mistaken in his view that Hess would soon be forgotten, his underlying assumption was correct: Hess's real value would be as a pawn in a much bigger game.